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2-18-2014

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Published version. Published in the newspaper entitled "Shepherd Express". February 18, 2014, A&E (2014). [Permalink](#). © 2014 Shepherd Express. Used with permission.

Tuesday, Feb. 18, 2014

Uncommon Art from Common Folk

Milwaukee Art Museum focuses on self-taught artists

By Curtis L. Carter



For anyone curious about what makes something art, a visit to the Milwaukee Art Museum before May 4 to view “Uncommon Folk: Traditions in American Art” will offer much to ponder. The exhibition features some 600 works from the museum’s permanent collection of American folk and self-taught artists in a diverse range of media.

The works in the exhibit range from a familiar Grandma Moses untitled landscape watercolor (ca. 1950) to the mid-century photographs of Milwaukee artist Eugene Von Bruenchenhein featuring exotic poses of his artistic muse and wife. Also from Milwaukee, is the enigmatic Prophet Blackmon who conducted his art and spiritual ministry in Milwaukee (1974-2010) from his shoe-repair business, which served as a religious community outreach and job training center.

The exhibition includes a large section of portraits, notably Bill Traylor’s *Talking Couple* in striking blue and brown tempura. Animal images (cats, dogs, horses, elephants, a great horned owl and snakes, among others) abound throughout the exhibition.

For the most part, social or political comment is rare among these works unless covertly expressed in patriotic images such as *Miss Liberty* (anonymous, ca. 1910). An exception is Lawrence H. Lebduska's *Hit-Mu-To* (1942) referencing the 1940s era of Fascism under Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo. The three leaders are imagined as brightly colored venomous snakes in a fanciful mythological scene with three charging white stallions.

The question of who these artists were offers a clue to their art. They were, for the most part, extra-ordinary people living ordinary, sometimes reclusive lives. Their special gifts of perception and sensitivity for transforming everyday life objects are evident. Usually without formal training, they found, through observation and inner expressive resources, uncommon images to share their visions. Hence, is it not surprising that viewers may find in these works experiences that resonate powerfully with their own everyday experiences?

Until the mid-20th century, folk and untutored artists went largely unnoticed in the art world. For a variety of reasons a significant body of American self-taught artists has attracted the attention of museums and collectors in Wisconsin, including the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan. The result is that arguably the most important collections of these artists reside within arm's reach for Milwaukee area residents.

The concentration of self-taught art in Wisconsin is due largely to the acquisition of the Michael and Julie Hall Collection under former MAM Director Russell Bowman, and recent gifts of the Anthony Petullo and Lanford Wilson collections. Director Ruth DeYoung Kohler at the Kohler Arts Center has focused their collection on preserving the works and working sites of the self-taught artists. We can be thankful for these efforts.